

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks to Students at James C. Wright Middle School in Madison, Wisconsin
November 4, 2009

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Well, we're thrilled to be here, and this is a school that's getting better and better, and you guys are working really, really hard. And we've been lucky. We have a President here who has got a tough, tough job. Being President is tough without the—he's fighting two wars, a really, really tough economy—I like your shirt.

Student. Thanks. [*Laughter*]

Secretary Duncan. And what amazes me is that week after week, month after month, he just keeps coming back to education, and he's absolutely passionate about it. He and his wife, the First Lady Michelle Obama, received great educations. Neither one was born with a lot of money, but they worked really hard and had great teachers and great principals and made the most of it. And now he's our President. So it's a pretty remarkable journey. The only reason he's the President is because he got a great education.

So we're thrilled to be here. He might want to say a few things, and looks like you guys have questions for him. And so we'll be quick, and we'll open up to your questions.

The President. Well, it is good to see all of you. Thanks so much for having us.

First of all, I've got a great Secretary of Education in Arne Duncan. So he helps school districts all across the country in trying to figure out how to improve what's going on in the schools. And let me just pick up on something that Arne said earlier.

I was really lucky to have a great education. I didn't have a lot of money. My parents weren't famous. In fact, my father left when I was 2 years old, so I really didn't grow up with a father in the house; mostly it was my mom and my grandparents. But they always emphasized education, and they were able to send me to good schools, and by working hard I was, obviously, in a position to do some good stuff.

My wife Michelle, same thing; she grew up on the south side of Chicago. Her dad was actually disabled, he had multiple sclerosis, but he still worked every day in a blue collar job. And her mom didn't work, and when she did she was a secretary. But because she worked really hard in school she ended up getting a scholarship to Princeton and to Harvard Law School and ended up really being able to achieve a lot.

So that's the reason why we are spending a lot of time talking to folks like you, because we want all of you to understand that there's nothing more important than what you're doing right here at this school. And Wright has a great reputation; this school is improving all the time. But ultimately, how good a school is depends on how well you guys are doing.

And the main message that I just wanted to deliver to you is, every single one of you could be doing the same kinds of things that Arne is doing or I'm doing. Or you could be running a company, or you can be inventing a product or you could—look, anything you can imagine, you can accomplish, but the only way you do it is if you're succeeding here in school. And we are spending a lot of money to try to improve school buildings and put computers in and make sure that your teachers are well trained and that they are getting the support they need.

So we're working really hard to try to reform the schools, but ultimately, what matters most is how badly you want a good education. If you think that somehow somebody is just going to—you can tilt your head and somebody is going to pour education in your ear, that's just not how it works. The only way that you end up being in a position to achieve is if you want it, if inside you want it.

And part of the reason why we wanted to talk to you guys is, you're right at the point now in your lives where what you do is really going to start mattering. My daughters are a little younger than you—Malia is 11, Sasha is 8—but when you're in grade school, you're playing—hopefully, somebody is making sure you're doing your homework when you get it, but to some degree you're still just kind of learning how to learn.

By the time you get to middle school, you're now going to be confronted with a lot of choices. You're going to start entering those teenage years where there are a lot of distractions and in some places people will say you don't need to worry about school or it's uncool to be smart or, you know, all kinds of things. And look, I'll be honest, I went through some of that when I was in high school, and I made some mistakes and had some setbacks.

So I just want everybody to understand right now that nothing is going to be more important to you than just being hungry for knowledge. And if all of you decide to do that, then there are going to be teachers and principals and secretaries of education who are going to be there to help you. So hopefully, you guys will take that all to heart.

All right. Okay. Now we're going to kick out everybody so I can let you—you guys can ask me all the really tough questions without having the press here.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:05 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to his mother-in-law Marian Robinson. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

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